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Suspense, Structure, and Point of View: Building Surprise in Fiction

Lydia R. Klismith
Hamline University

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Surprise in fiction creates interesting tension for the reader. The reader, familiar with the standard structure of story – assuming a traditional three-act structure – expects there to be a climax near the end of the text. Surprise and climax are often but not always concurrent. "When the writing is successful, the reader senses that the climax is coming and feels a strong urge to skip to it directly, but cannot quite tear himself away from the paragraph he's on" (Gardner 160). This implies that the reader, being familiar with traditional story structure and aware of the building conflict, knows that the climax and surprise are coming. This tension is between the known and the unknown. Charles Baxter, in his essay *On Defamiliarization,* writes that "Familiarity […] is a kind of power, the power to predict and the power to abstract. It replaces the pleasure of the unknown with the pleasures of security" (37-38). Assuming that the reader expects some kind of surprise, how is the author supposed to genuinely surprise the reader? The purpose of this paper is to examine specific tools that fiction writers can use to build surprise. While there are many different ways a writer can achieve surprise, there are two rules that apply to most texts: the tools put to use must be used consistently and be used in conjunction with other tools. Surprise relies primarily on suspense. The author creates suspense through his or her use of the elements of structure and point of view.

Before examining what supports surprise, it is important to first specify what surprise is. Patricia Highsmith, author of *Strangers on a Train*, a thriller novel, writes that surprise is "an unexpected turn of events reasonably consistent with the characters of the protagonists" (60). The important phrase here is "reasonably consistent," which brings up another seeming paradox: the surprise can't be *too* surprising. An underdeveloped surprise seems to arise from nowhere to

cut the story short. An excellent surprise will undermine something that the reader believed was true but supply the reader with new information that is "reasonably consistent" with the rest of the text. This means that the author must strike a balance between the "pleasure of the unknown" and "the pleasures of security" to create a surprise that fits within the text (Baxter 37-38).

Knowing that a surprise has to be reasonably consistent with the story, the author must make consistent use of structure and point of view to create suspense and build surprise. However excellent surprise is, readers will not see it unless there is something driving them on. "The fuel of all good narrative is suspense" (Checkoway 9). As well as pushing the reader towards the ending, suspense adds weight to the surprise itself. But suspense isn't just when "the possibility of violent action, even death, is close all the time. While this is one way of creating suspense, it is too extreme to fit every text and simplifies a tool that is much more complex. Suspense is the result of structure and point of view. For example, *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, by Sherman Alexie, makes use of these suspense, structure, and point of view in excellent harmony. Junior, a boy who decides he wants to go to a school outside of the reservation he lives on, faces social challenges like making new friends and struggling to keep the friends he has back on the reservation. Much of the tension comes from Junior's fear of what will happen. Junior fears getting into a fight with the boys at the off-reservation school: "I'd lost most every fight I'd ever been in. I was afraid those monsters were going to kill me. And I don't mean 'kill' as in 'metaphor'. I mean 'kill' as in 'beat me to death'" (64). However, just a page later this problem is resolved when Junior strikes first, intimidating the bigger kids into leaving him alone. Much of the tension of the story comes from Junior's fear of what will happen, even though death is never near. Suspense is driven even if the stakes are only imagined. After all, the story is told in past tense, informing the reader that Junior has lived to tell his story.

This pattern of perceived danger, reaction, and resolution occurs throughout the text, creating an overall structure that fuels the suspense of the story. Donald Beecher, in an article from *Psychology and Literature* argues that a while a sympathetic protagonist is one way of creating suspense, "literature also produces patterns craving completion, problem-solving situations, and much else that places the mind in a state of epistemic quest" (257). Many of the chapters in Alexie's text maintain this pattern. Although the reader knows that Junior makes it through high school so he can tell his story, the set-up of every problem demands the attention of the reader – how will they know how Junior makes it out of *this* problem?

The Absolutely True Diary of a Part Time Indian also benefits through its consistent use of its limited third person point of view. Although the story is told in past tense, there's no significantly older Junior providing hindsight that would make the problems Junior faces seem smaller. Instead the point of view is limited to what feels like a few months of time between the action themselves and the writing of the text. This allows the author to maintain the tension of the text. While the reader knows that Junior must make it through each problems because of how he's narrating the text, the limitation of its point of view keeps the problems present and threatening.

Figuring out what information the reader gets when is an exercise in structure and an extension of point of view. Naturally, the protagonist's knowledge is limited, and the reader is limited to what the protagonists know. The author still has to consciously manipulate the flow of information to create surprise. Structure is the way an author shapes the story; it's the purposeful selection of its sequence of events. However, structure is also the framework that holds up suspense – the creation of "patterns craving completion" (Beecher 257) or the setup of "tantalizing questions" (Checkoway 9). For example, *I am the Cheese* a young adult mystery

novel by Robert Cormier, relies on its large-scale structure to create suspense and surprise. The story opens with Adam Farmer riding his bike out of his hometown to go visit his father. These biking sections are broken up with undated interview sections between Adam and a doctor. Each interview section usually contains a third person past tense flashback as Adam remembers details of his life. These three different sections advance the story in different ways each time and create a pattern that the reader becomes comfortable with. In each biking section – which is told in first person present tense – Adam encounters some kind of obstacle and has to overcome it. In each interview section, the interviewer, Brint, becomes more threatening as Adam is unwilling to give up information. In each flashback, something about Adam's past is revealed. By providing the reader with a constant structure, the reader knows when new information is about to be given. Threats in the biking sections become larger, each interview makes Brint seem more untrustworthy, and each flashback advances the mystery of Adam's past. The growing threats fit perfectly with Burroway's interpretation of structure as "a pattern of trouble and effort to overcome […] repeated on a larger and smaller scale" (170). On the small scale, each chapter contains some kind of confrontation while on the large scale the story moves toward its climax.

Because the author doesn't supply the context for Adam's bike ride or why he's having interviews with Brint, tension arises from trying to make the three seemingly unconnected pieces come together. The surprise for the reader comes in discovering how the pieces are connected; the interview is taking place at an asylum where Adam has been ever since his father and mother were murdered while under witness protection. The bike ride sections are actually Adam riding around on asylum grounds, seeing fellow members of the asylum as threats in his journey. By using a repeating structure, *I am the Cheese*, by Robert Cormier maintains a high level of suspense, pushing the reader towards its very surprising conclusion.

While *I am the Cheese* relies on a three part repetitive structure, structure can also be viewed as what information the reader is given when. Viewing structure as the flow of information means that the author has to be absolutely aware of what information the reader knows when. In order for the surprise to be fully believed by the reader, components of it should exist within the text beforehand. Reflecting on the text once completed, the reader should be able to determine when the surprise was first suggested. Again though, there's another balance that the author has to find: are there enough supporting details to suggest the surprise or are there so many that they give the surprise away? Charles Baxter calls these details "arrows" which point to the conclusion of the text. A parallel can be found in an argumentative essay. In an essay, all arrows must point in the same direction, or the argument created is weak. In fiction, arrows must point in multiple directions or the text becomes "too meaningful too fast. […] The writer has decided what her story is about too early and has concentrated too fixedly on that one truth." (35-36). In his essay *On Defamiliarization* Baxter is talking about keeping a text from becoming bland and predictable. He contrasts the difference between a real-life eulogy and a fictional character sketch. The eulogy only contains arrows that point in one direction while the fictional character has arrows that fall in multiple directions. One is predictable while the other is not.

Arrows point to the conclusion of the story. It's not that an arrow is a clue – a clue would suggest that the reader is being challenged to solve the mystery of the text. Multiple arrows exist throughout the text pointing in multiple directions, but their purpose isn't to illuminate the ending before the reader gets there. When "All the arrows are pointed in the same direction […] something is probably wrong with the story" (Baxter 35). Rather, arrows exist to prove to the reader in retrospect that the conclusion of the text was inevitable. In order for arrows to hide in plain sight, they need to function as significant detail. "A detail […] is *significant* if it also

conveys an idea or a judgment or both" (Burroway and Stuckey-French 24). A clear example of this is in *Going Bovine.* The protagonist, Cameron, notes that "Last night, I was so bored I actually watched a public television broadcast about some scientists building their own big bang machine" (Bray 66). Cameron meets those same scientists about two hundred pages later. The detail of watching the show, although it seemed random, points to Cameron eventually meeting those scientists.

Holes, a young adult novel by Louis Sachar, relies on arrows hiding in plain sight as significant detail in order to support its surprise. *Holes* tells the story of Stanley Yelnats, a boy sent to a juvenile detention camp for a crime he didn't commit. It also tells the story of Stanley's great great grandfather and the history of Camp Greenlake, the juvenile detention camp where Stanley is stuck. Much like in *I am the Cheese,* the energy of the text comes from finding connections between seemingly unconnected pieces. Significant details appear in each section, drawing the three strongly together. Flashbacks or dips into history all inform the next section of the text and seeing how they speak to each other is part of the surprise. For example, close to the beginning of the text the reader is given the story of Elya Yelnats, Stanley's great great grandfather. Elya makes a promise to Madam Zeroni, a gypsy, that he'll carry her up a mountain for her to drink the water there. He forgets his promise and instead boards a ship to America, where his family is cursed because he forgot about Madam Zeroni. Closer to the end of the text, Stanley and Zero run away from Camp Greenlake, nearly dying of thirst. Exhausted, Zero collapses, and Stanley carries his friend up a mountain where they find water. Unknown to Stanley and Zero, Zero is the decedent of Madam Zeroni, and by carrying his friend up the mountain Stanley lifts his family curse. The surprise and satisfaction of the text comes in connecting these details – the reader gets to complete the pattern of the text. Sachar's selection of

what information the reader gets and when is a careful exercise of structure, and *Holes* is structured so that it becomes a series of "patterns craving completion" (Beecher 257).

While both Corimier and Sachar make effective use of structural elements, *I am the Cheese* also uses an unreliable narrator in order to mislead the reader. The biking scenes where Adam crosses the countryside and meets strange people are taking place at the asylum, not on the road to visiting his father. Adam isn't actively trying to mislead the reader. His delusion is real to him and therefore real to the reader. Manipulating point of view tools usually mean that the reader will be surprised by the protagonist. Unreliable narrators, withholding information, psychic distance, and blind spots are all tools that are an extension of characterization. *How* the character tells the story is telling of who the protagonist is.

First person narration is limited to the perspective of its narrator, giving the reader a limited perspective of the reality of the text. *Wintergirls* by Laurie Halse Anderson, tells the story of Lia, a girl struggling with anorexia. Told in a claustrophobically close first person present tense, the text maintains a consistent logic for Lia's self-harming behavior. Her negative self-talk fuels her behavior: "I don't deserve it," she thinks to herself, staring at a plate of cupcakes, "I'm a fat load and I disgust myself. I take up too much space already. I am an ugly, nasty hypocrite. I am trouble. I am a waste" (Anderson 202). The plot is highly internal, focused on Lia dealing with the death of her bulimic friend. The use of present tense suggests the possibility that Lia doesn't survive. Had *Wintergirls* been told in a more distant third person, it would have been much more challenging for Anderson to maintain tension because so much of the conflict is internal. By selecting a close first person perspective and building on first person's inherent unreliability, Laurie Halse Anderson creates a tense and terrifying fiction piece.

While second and third person narration certainly has the ability to mislead the reader, in first person the reader is given the illusion that it is the character lying to the reader. In second or third person its easier for the reader to feel tricked by the author, although a close psychic distance can help. Two examples of this would be *The Lottery* by Shirley Jackson and *The Reluctant Assassin* by Eion Colfer. Both stories are in third person and both deliberately withhold information from the reader as a means of creating suspense. They're very different texts but hold the same tool in common. In *The Reluctant Assassin* the protagonists, Chevie and Riley, are trapped by one of the villains, Tibor. Riley, drugged so that he's listless and confused, tries to attack Tibor, who easily knocks Riley away. The narrator tells the reader "[Chevie] suspected that Riley had pulled a fast one, in spite of his drugged state" but supplies no other information (Colfer 274-275). It isn't until the action is coming to a close that the narrator reveals "his eyes lighted on the Farspeak [telephone] which lay where Riley had tipped it" (283). This detail wasn't supplied to the reader even though Chevie saw it and likely guessed what Riley was doing. This was to maintain the tension of the scene. Had the reader known several pages beforehand that the protagonists had knocked over the telephone so someone could listen as they tricked Tibor into talking about his schemes, all the energy of the scene would have melted away.

In comparison, *The Lottery* seems to withhold information under the assumption that the reader already knows what's going on. The narrator provides context for the lottery – explaining the history of the box that the slips of paper are put into, for instance – but not an explanation for what the lottery is actually for until the reader is forced to watch the ritual be carried though. *The Lottery* withholds information in a way that maintains the illusion of a trustworthy narrator. *The Thief* by Megan Whalen Turner also has an unreliable narrator, but this time first person. In

contrast to *Wintergirls*, *The Thief* is in a very distant first person. The first person narration suggests to the reader that they're getting a firsthand view of events, but the psychic distance actually keeps the reader so far away that the text could easily be placed in third person by switching out the pronouns. Gen, the protagonist, is more observant than he is introspective. Gen acts and reacts to his surroundings but readers are rarely given more than a surface-level view of his reasons for his actions. Rather than Gen telling the reader the story of how he landed in jail, Gen's history is drawn out of him as other characters ask him questions. He doesn't correct assumptions other characters make about him. While he does lie to other characters, he only ever lies by omission to the reader. In a pivotal action scene, Gen narrates "I brushed shoulders with the magus for just a moment […]. As a branch passed overhead, I grabbed it, using my free hand, and pulled myself up into the tree" (Turner 156). While this is mostly true, the narrator skips over the important detail that he doesn't reveal until near the end of the text: "I'd moved my horse […] until I could cut the thong around his [the magus'] neck with the penknife I'd stolen the first or second day out of prison" (204). In that action of cutting the thong around the magus' neck, Gen steals an artifact that they had spent the majority of the text acquiring. The only detail that points to this is that he grabs the tree branch with his free hand, suggesting that he is holding something when there's nothing for him to hold onto. The surprise is in finding out that Gen has been conning the other characters and the reader for the majority of the text. His character doesn't actually undergo change, but the reader's understanding of who he is shifts dramatically. By tricking readers into believing that they're just as informed as Gen, *The Thief* successfully surprises the reader through its manipulation of psychic distance.

In contrast to *The Thief*, *Liar* by Justine Larbalesteier, has a protagonist who actively lies to the reader rather than by omission. The text follows Micah, a teen girl dealing with the death

of her boyfriend, Zach. She swears on the first page that she's going to start telling the truth. However, Micah continues to lie, backtracking to 'correct' herself. There are multiple ways to read the text because the reader is given no outsider perspective, and there is no way of detecting whether Micah is being honest or not. There are certainly surprises in the story. Micah says she has a little brother but then backtracks to say that she never had a brother, and then backtracks again to say that she had a little brother but he died. Half way through the text Micah admits to being a werewolf, which actually fits with some of the stranger details that the reader may have taken as being a lie – being born with a coating of fine fur, for instance. Because the reality of the text is so fluid change becomes the new normal. *Liar* is an extreme example of an unreliable narrator, giving the reader no opportunity to really know what truth is within the text. This perhaps weakens the surprises of the text. Without having a solid grounding in reality to lose, it becomes easy for the reader to accept revelations in stride.

Beka Cooper: Mastiff by Tamora Pierce is told in first person past tense. Set in a fantasy world, the protagonist, Beka, is part of the police force and is focused on solving crimes. As has been said earlier, point of view is an extension of characterization – how the protagonist conveys the story to the reader is telling of this protagonist. This connection between character and point of view can manifest the character's blind spots. Blind spots can be an important character tool. The character is incapable of either noticing a detail or placing meaning upon whatever details she notices. Beka is given clues that point to a specific conclusion – that her friend is going to betray her – but she's either incapable of putting these clues together or she actively denies putting the information together because she trusts her friend. Because the story is in first person and because of Pierce's skill at crafting extremely likable characters, the reader is just as likely to deny whatever clues s/he notices just as Beka does. While the betrayal is surprising, it is "an

unexpected turn of events, reasonably consistent with the characters of the protagonists" (Highsmith 60). Pierce uses blind spots to hide surprises in plain sight.

The Hunger Games relies on the same tool in a different way. Katniss, the protagonist of the dystopian novel, is so focused on survival that it's nearly impossible for her recognize that another character is romantically interested in her. Collins makes the romance apparent to the reader to add tension to the story, but Katniss either doesn't recognize it or refuses to believe it. By creating blind spots in Katniss, Collins introduces even more tension into her already action-focused text.

The writer uses multiple elements of structure, characterization, and point of view to surprise the reader. The writer must control the flow of information, create tantalizing questions, use patterns to his or her advantage, and craft significant details into arrows. By making use of these tools, a writer has a huge variety of ways to surprise the reader. Even though surprise is in many ways an expected component of story, the writer still has many available means of creating surprise. Because every reader is unique, negotiating the flow of information is a huge part of the work, requiring the writer to think as a reader, and hopefully relying on trusted readers to assist with the editing process. Crafting surprise is an exercise in thinking of both the large and small scale all at once; the author must be aware of structure as a whole while also placing careful attention on small details like a character's word choice or the placement of an arrow. While all the tools this essay has outlined can be used to create surprise, an author's ability to maintain cognitive dissonance – of thinking as both the writer and the reader – is key to creating a text that builds to a mind-bending surprise.

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